

The Missouri State Park System – Past, Present and Future with the Parks-and-Soils Sales Tax

10/2005

The Missouri state park system has a proud tradition of preserving and interpreting the state's most outstanding natural landscapes and cultural features while providing recreational opportunities. Since its beginnings in the 1920s, the state park system has grown to more than 140,000 acres in 83 state parks and historic sites and 61,000 acres in the Roger Pryor Pioneer Backcountry. More than 17 million people annually visit the state park system, which is considered one of the best in the nation.

Because of decreasing funds in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state park system had begun to deteriorate. In 1984, Missourians passed a one-tenth-of-one-percent sales tax to support state parks and soil conservation efforts. Two-thirds of Missouri voters renewed the tax in 1988 and 1996, which is very unusual for a sales tax. Unless reauthorized, the current tax will expire in 2008, leaving the state park system to find an alternative source of funding.

What Has Been Done So Far

Services: The key priority for the funds has been to provide service to the visitors. The vast majority of the staff provides service directly to visitors at state parks and historic sites. This means they are maintaining the parks and sites, upgrading the facilities or assisting visitors. The increased presence of law enforcement personnel continues to ensure the safety of the system's guests. Interpreters or tour guides help visitors understand the natural and cultural significance of a site. Resource managers direct projects to protect the natural and cultural resources and manage any threats to them. The number of employees for the state park system has remained fairly constant for the past 10 years. The division believes the staff level is adequate to maintain the current level of services, given the restraints of the budget.

In response to user input, a centralized campground reservation system was implemented, which makes reserving a campsite easier and more convenient. In 2005, 2,350 campsites in 35 state park campgrounds were available for reservation. The remaining campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Facilities: The consistent funding from the sales tax has allowed the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' Division of State Parks to maintain and upgrade the state park system to better serve the needs of the visitors and protect the resources. The focus has been to maintain the current state park system and enhance facilities and services where necessary and appropriate.

The support of the tax has allowed the following:

- 1) Structures have been repaired and renovated;
- 2) a maintenance management program has been established to ensure that the improved facilities will not deteriorate;
- 3) improvements have included everything from repairing roofs, shelter houses and cabins to stabilizing historic structures and remodeling dining lodges;

- 4) a cultural resources fund was established to repair historic objects or to acquire period furnishings to enhance the historic atmosphere of historic sites; and
- 5) a natural resource fund was established to help manage the system's stewardship program to protect important landscapes and natural resources.

Other Efforts: Another key priority has been to improve the facilities in the system's 40 campgrounds. These improvements include upgrading electrical sites, increasing the number of electrical campsites, and renovating showerhouses and restrooms. Currently, about 2,400 of the system's 3,500 campsites have electricity and/or additional services such as water and sewer. More than 450 campsites have been upgraded with electricity in the last two years.

Day-use areas have also been improved, which means better picnic areas, shelter houses, beaches and playgrounds have been built or old ones repaired. More than 240 of the system's 260 miles of road have been surfaced or resurfaced, providing easier access to the facilities. New exhibits have been developed at many state parks and historic sites. More than 900 miles of trail are provided, and a major emphasis in the recent years has been to provide trails for equestrian users in response to the needs of this facet of visitation. Katy Trail State Park was extended from Sedalia to Clinton, making it 225 miles long.

Infrastructure is often unnoticed but is vital to the state park system. Water and sewer systems, lagoons and wastewater treatment facilities have been built or upgraded in approximately 30 state parks, ensuring that all environmental standards are met and the park's valuable resources are protected.

Special Initiatives: The Missouri state park system has become a national leader in the efforts to make the system accessible to everyone. The sales tax funding has allowed the department to upgrade its facilities in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act so everyone can truly enjoy the state park system.

A catastrophic fund was established to allow the department to quickly address disasters when they strike state parks and historic sites. This funding mechanism can be used to repair and clean up parks and sites after fires, tornados or other weather-related disasters so they can be opened to the public sooner. In the recent past, it was used to rebuild a building that burned from a lighting-ignited fire and clean up the campground after a windstorm, both at Harry S Truman State Park.

New Developments: All of the recent acquisitions were the result of partnerships or donations but the sales tax was used to develop and operate the site. Two sites were donated to the system: Morris State Park, which preserves a unique landscape in southeast Missouri; and Clark's Hill/Norton State Historic Site, which preserves a hill that William Clark climbed and noted in his journal in 1804. The other site was the Edward "Ted" and Pat Jones-Confluence Point State Park, which includes the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. This site was the result of several donations, grants and partnerships. A unique private/public partnership between the department and the L-A-D Foundation is allowing public access to 61,000 acres in the Roger Pryor Pioneer Backcountry. These recent initiatives continue a trend that more than 60 percent of Missouri's state park system has either been donated or acquired at little or no cost through leases.

The Response

The response to the improved state park system and the services provided to the public has been outstanding. In several surveys conducted since 1995, users of state parks and historic sites indicated their ongoing satisfaction with the state park system. According to the 2000 survey conducted by the University of Missouri, almost 99 percent of the users surveyed were satisfied with their visit. This satisfaction is also reflected in the overwhelming approval of the sales tax during the last two renewals.

National recognition for the state park system has come from the National Gold Medal and State Park Awards Program, where Missouri has been one of the top four finalists the last five times. The contest is held to recognize state park systems for excellence in park and recreation administration.

The state park system also has an impact beyond the users that enjoy it. A 2002 study found that visitors spent a total of \$410 million on trips to state parks and historic sites. When this amount is spent and re-spent in the economy, it brings the state park system's overall economic impact in the state to \$538 million. In addition to the statewide impact, parks and sites greatly benefit the local communities.

What Remains to be Done

The Department of Natural Resources must be able to continue to address factors that threaten individual parks and sites. Possible solutions include acquisitions of key adjoining properties, increased stewardship activities in natural areas and wild areas, and additional renovation of historic properties. The department also must be able to accommodate unforeseen circumstances or new public requirements. Other concerns include changing environmental protection laws that create new standards for wastewater treatment facilities.

Although much progress has been made, the park system continues to need ongoing stewardship, repairs and maintenance. The main priority for the future will be to maintain and upgrade the current facilities while expanding when partnerships can be formed and where economically feasible. Because the state park system does not receive any general revenue, the sales tax makes up three-fourths of the funding to accomplish this.

These future priorities include maintaining and operating more than 1,780 structures in state parks and historic sites. To meet the changing needs of users, facilities must be upgraded, expanded and made accessible. This will include improving campgrounds, group camps and concession facilities.

The department is committed to maintaining the current level of visitor services. To accomplish this, the department must be able to guarantee that there is enough staff to provide clean and safe facilities; enough interpreters to present the significance of each of the parks and sites; enough law enforcement personnel to ensure visitor safety; and enough general staff to provide adequate service to the public.

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